

BOOK REVIEW

Catherine Boone. *Inequality and Political Cleavage in Africa: Regionalism by Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 326 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Index. Bibliography. \$39.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781009441612.

Inequality and Political Cleavage in Africa significantly contributes to the literature by offering a political economy counterargument to the assumption that ethnicity is the primary cause of political competition and conflict in Africa. Boone takes an in-depth look at whether geographic economic inequalities provide a better explanation than ethnic identities. She offers a strong theoretical and empirical argument that regional economic differences explain political competition. The work combines case studies from all regions of sub-Saharan Africa with a mixed-method analysis of economic and political data to create a persuasive argument. Boone ultimately seeks to put “ethnicity in its place” (197), making room for political economy.

Boone argues that the central factor that explains political competition and conflict is the regional differences in economic development within countries. She contends that unequal natural resource distribution and the reinforcing effects of regional territorial institutions generate and maintain regional economic inequalities. Where regions have higher levels of natural resources (e.g., sufficient rainfall, rich agricultural land, resource-rich mines), they have higher levels of economic development and more developed organizations and associations. These inequalities create different national policy preferences and differences in access to the national economy and political system.

She argues higher levels of economic development led to the creation of labor unions, farmer’s associations, and other organizations. These organizations help the populace find common economic interests and mobilize in support of these interests. Unlike poorer, more underdeveloped regions, these areas focus less on immediate clientelist benefits and more on broader national economic policies that match their economic interests. The result is the formation of regional economic and political coalitions that cross ethnic boundaries. Regions with fewer natural resources and lower economic development are less organized and have less access to the national political systems. These multiethnic regional economic and political coalitions transform the basis of political competition and conflict into a struggle over economic rather than ethnic interests.

Boone argues these regional economic inequalities originated in the policies of colonial governments. She argues in Chapter Three that colonial institutions were designed to scale up identities and economic development to the regional level. These institutions sought to regionalize the economy. Colonial

administrators treated regions differently, with an eye to extracting resources for international export. The author argues that colonial administrators deliberately underdeveloped certain regions by using them as migrant labor pools and developed other regions. Where regions had a high potential for agricultural or mining production, the administrators created infrastructure to exploit these resources. The result created economic inequalities between regions that persist today because postcolonial governments often continue the pattern of economic development.

Boone argues these regional economic inequalities are magnified by political institutions. Boone identifies three combinations of these two factors that produce different bases for political competition. Where the governmental institutions are more regional than national, these institutions reinforce the regional inequalities. As a result, political competition is primarily based on regional identities and inequalities. Where inequality is high and institutions are more national than regional, class-based conflicts are the primary basis of competition and conflict (e.g., South Africa). Competition occurs across regions rather than between regions. Where regional inequalities are high and institutions are nationalizing, regional inequalities are difficult to mobilize into national political competition. While Boone acknowledges that some institutions are designed to be ethnic (e.g., traditional land tenure structures, etc.), she argues that these structures and the resulting competition remain at the subregional level. Mobilization at this level is less likely to create coalitions that can influence national political competition.

Boone explicitly identifies high and low development regions with consistent patterns of support for specific parties—regional blocs—in each of the twelve countries comparing their relative inequality and political support patterns. She also identifies regions that do not constitute a regional political bloc—inconsistent in their support for specific parties. Using past studies and quantitative data, she finds that parties supported by regions with higher economic development are more likely to hold power. Low development blocs are less likely to hold power. She does provide some qualitative evidence that these parties support the sectoral interests of these regions in some of these countries.

The book misses several opportunities to strengthen her argument which seeks to disaggregate multiethnic and ethnic effects. Boone argues that an electoral bloc is multiethnic when less than 70 percent come from one ethnic group. Electoral systems, specifically plurality, can translate a multiethnic voter pool into single group political dominance at far lower percentages. Demonstrating that the support is multiethnic could be accomplished by showing similar support in constituencies where different ethnic groups dominate. Comparing the organizational patterns in more and less developed regions could solidify her argument that the former are more mobilized in multiethnic organizations.

Boone makes a significant contribution by questioning the dominance of ethnicity as the explanation for national political competition and conflict in the literature. By focusing on political economy, she provides an alternative explanation to the assumption of ethnic-based political competition and conflict in Africa. Her systematic use of qualitative and quantitative evidence provides a

strong empirical case. By using countries from all regions, she provides an analysis relevant to cross-national, regional, and country-specific scholars.

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